

Asking Questions That Prompt Discussion

The types of questions teachers ask influence how students read.

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Watch the Video!

Watch a teacher guide an in-depth discussion about literature. www.nassp.org/pl1111fisher.

When asked a series of recall questions, students focus their reading on details that allow them to respond to questions about facts. Alternatively, when asked questions that require evaluation or synthesis, students' reading changes and they focus their attention on global issues and compare those issues with their own thinking. The following two examples illustrate this difference.

Over the course of the semester, Morgan has been asked a number of questions that require her to recall details and events from the text. For example, when the class was studying *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (Scholastic, 2008), Morgan was asked such questions as, When did the story take place? Where did the story take place? and, What happened when Katniss first met Gale? As a result, Morgan became a close and detailed reader who could not respond to the question, What would it take, in terms of social changes, for the events in *The Hunger Games* to happen? She floundered and instead of answering it, retold the storyline from the text.

In another school, Jessie has participated in a number of discussions about texts and has had an opportunity to respond to a number of different questions including, What might have happened if Peeta had not given Katniss bread? Was there anything that puzzled you in this chapter? When she was asked the same question about the social changes that could create *The Hunger Games*, Jessie responded with a series of possible events, some based on her extrapolation from the text (e.g., "There would probably have been a war") and some from her experience (e.g., "I think that the power of government would have to change; I don't think that this could happen in a democracy").

Types of Questions Matter

Of course, teachers have known about question types and the skills required to answer different types of questions for years. Who hasn't heard of Bloom's taxonomy and the levels of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation? There's also a revision of Bloom's taxonomy for the 21st century (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) that focuses on remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

What may not be as clear, despite a strong understanding of questioning taxonomies, is the effect of repeatedly asking certain kinds of questions on the reading habits of students. Over time, when they are asked lower-order questions, they read for that type of information only. As a cautionary note, we are not suggesting that teachers eliminate knowledge, comprehension, or application questions. That information is vital to students' ability to answer complex questions. After all, Jessie would not have been able to answer the question if she didn't have a basic understanding of the text.

Shifting Expectations

The Common Core State Standards (www.corestandards.org) will require that students provide evidence from the text and justify their responses. These may be new expectations for students who are accustomed to making personal connections with the text and not accustomed to supporting their conclusions or justifying their opinions (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2011). Of course, students need practice if they are going to succeed in meeting the new expectations, and the types of questions that students are asked will guide how they read the text.

With that in mind, we have developed a number of questions that teachers can use to get students started thinking about the text, justifying their answers, and discussing the text. (See figure 1.) The major departure from traditional practice is that students must be reminded to provide justifications and evidence from the text for each of their answers. The video that accompanies this article shows a teacher as he moves around to various literature discussion groups in his classroom and uses the questions to guide student discussions.

Interestingly, when teachers use these types of questions with students to press for evidence and justification, the questions that students ask one another also change. Students begin to phrase questions to peers in a way that is similar to the phrasing used by their teachers. Their discussions, then, become more than amateur interactions about texts. Their group interactions help students learn the type of thinking required by experts.

As an example, consider the following discussion students had about the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972). The students were talking about the reasons that the Jewish people in this book did not fight back right away, but rather went along with the plans for relocation.

Marla: I don't think that they really thought that it would be that bad. I mean, who would have imagined that? But did you find something in the text that really shows that? We need more evidence.

Deon: Yeah, like it says right here, "Annihilate an entire people? Wipe out a population dispersed throughout so many nations? So many millions of people! By

what means? In the middle of the twentieth century?" It's on page eight. They just didn't think it was possible. I agree with you.

Jessica: Yeah, I agree too. But I also think that it was because life was kinda normal. Yeah, they moved and lost things. But at first their life seemed kinda normal. See right here—on page 11—where it says, "Little by little life returned to 'normal.' The barbed wire that encircled us like a wall did not fill us with real fear. In fact, we felt this was not a bad thing; we were entirely among ourselves."

Deon: Exactly, that's why they didn't fight. They couldn't imagine things would ever be like they turned out, and that their lives got back to normal—well, kinda normal—not too bad so that they would fight. There's lots of evidence for this.

This discussion demonstrates the power of the types of questions that these students have been asked. Their reading is deeper and focuses on the evidence that the author is presenting. Like their classmates, Marla, Deon, and Jessica have learned to focus their reading on a wide range of questions and in the process, they came to understand that they must provide evidence and justification for their responses.

Observation

This is one of the things that an educational leader should look for in the classroom. What types of questions are students asked about their readings? If the questions focus exclusively or even predominately on recall and knowledge, then the teacher may need to expand his or her repertoire. If a wide range of questions are being



used, the next thing to look for is the students' ownership of the discussion. Do the students ask one another questions and provide evidence for their answers? If not, this is an appropriate teaching point. If they do, we'd expect that the students are well on their way to demonstrating proficiency on the new Common Core State Standards assessments that will be implemented in a few years. **PL**

REFERENCES

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Figure 1

Questions About Texts

THE STORY

- What happened in the story?
- Were you able to predict the ending?
- What other way might the story have ended?
- What will probably happen next?
- What might have happened if [a certain action] had not taken place?
- What was the most important part of the story?
- List important words in such categories as people, animals, places, or things.

SETTING

- Where did the story take place?
- Why did this setting work?
- Do you know of a place like this?
- When did the story take place—past, present, or future?
- Which part of the story best describes the setting?
- What words does the author use to describe the setting?

AUTHOR

- What do you know about the author?
- Why do you think the author wrote the book? What is he or she trying to tell you in the book? What does this book tell us about the author?
- What sorts of things (people, places, behavior, feelings, and so on) does the author like or dislike?
- What did the author have to know about to write this book?

CHARACTERS

- Choose one character: Why is this character important in the story? What lesson did the character learn?
- Do any of the characters change?
- Why did they behave as they did?
- Was the behavior of a particular character right or wrong?
- Are people really like these characters?

BASIC QUESTIONS

- Was there anything you liked about this book? What especially caught your attention? What would you have liked more of?
- Was there anything you disliked?
- Were there parts that bored you?
- Was there anything that puzzled you or that you thought strange?
- Was there anything that completely surprised you?

GENERAL QUESTIONS

While you were reading, or now when you think about it, were there words or phrases or other things to do with the language that you liked or disliked? Have you noticed anything special about the way language is used in this book?

If the writer asked you what could be improved in the book, what would you say? If you had written this book, how would you have made it better?

Has anything that happens in this book ever happened to you? What parts in the book seem to you to be the most true-to-life? Did the book make you think differently about your own similar experience?

When you were reading, did you “see” the story happening in your imagination? Which details—which passages—helped you see it best? Which passages stay in your mind most vividly?

We’ve listened to one another’s thoughts and heard all sorts of things that each of us has noticed. Are you surprised by anything someone else said? Has anyone said anything that has changed your mind about this book? Has anyone helped you understand it better? Tell me about the things people said that struck you the most.

How long did it take the story to happen? Did we find out about the story in the order in which the events actually happened? Do you always tell a story in sequential order? Why or why not?

Where did the story happen? Could it just as well have been set anywhere? Did you think about the setting as you were reading? Are there passages in the book that are especially about the place where the story is set?

Who was narrating the story—do we know? Is the story told in first person or third person? What does the person telling the story think about the characters? Do you think he or she likes them?

Think of yourself as a spectator. With whose eyes did you see the story? Did you only see what one character in the story saw, or sometimes did you see the story through another character? (Were you inside the head of one character or a number of characters?)

When you were reading the story, did you feel it was happening now, or did you feel it had happened in the past and was being remembered? What in the writing made you feel this way?

Did you feel as though you were an observer, watching what was happening but not a part of the action? If you were an observer, where were you watching from—beside characters, above them looking down on the action, or somewhere else? Were there particular places in the book where you felt that way?

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Title: Asking Questions That Prompt Discussion

Source: Princ Leadership 12 no3 N 2011 p. 58-60

ISSN: 2156-2113

Publisher: National Association of Secondary School Principals
1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091-1537

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